DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 445 398 EA 030 603

AUTHOR	Nappi, Chiara R.
TITLE	Why Charter Schools? The Princeton Story.
INSTITUTION	Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	1999-10-00
NOTE	22p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, 1627 K Street, NW Suite 600, Washington, DC 20006; Tel: 888-823-7474. For full text: http://www.edexcellence.net.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Charter Schools; Educational Policy; Elementary Secondary Education; Nontraditional Education; *Parent Attitudes; Parent Participation; Parent School Relationship; *Program Evaluation; School Choice
IDENTIFIERS	New Jersey (Princeton)

ABSTRACT

This report describes the genesis of the Princeton Charter School. It discusses how a group of parents who wanted challenging standards and clearly stated expectations for their children attempted to reform their schools. These parents became locked in disagreement with those who believed that the new standards would not suit all children, especially some of those in minority groups. After trying to change the schools by serving on the school board and by trying to persuade educators, the reform-minded parents opted to start a charter school. The paper details the aspects of public education in Princeton that some parents found so objectionable, such as the lack of a sequential and systematic curriculum; the variance in children's learning experiences; and the absence of a challenging math program. It also outlines the efforts to change the schools by electing reformers to the school board and by hiring a like-minded superintendent, actions that met with resistance from teachers and the education union. The paper describes the reform-minded parents' decision to start their own school. It summarizes the new school's philosophy and the opposition that developed against the school. It concludes with an overview of how the Princeton Charter School is currently functioning. (RJM)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 445 398

THOMAS B. FORDHAM FOUNDATION
OUTSIDE THE BOX

Why Charter Schools? The Princeton Story

by Chiara R. Nappi

October 1999

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

EA 030603

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
K. Amis
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Table of Contents

Foreword

Executive Summary

Introduction

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The Conflict Unfolds

Trying to Change the System

The Reaction

The Founding of the Charter School

Opposition to the Charter School

The Princeton Charter School Today

Conclusion

Foreword

The debate over choice and charter schools usually focuses on troubled urban settings and melted-down inner city schools. What need would parents in pastoral suburbs have for an alternative? What good would competition do in a community whose public school system already enjoys a solid reputation for quality?

Why Charter Schools? The Princeton Story reveals that the need for choice and competition is not restricted to families in inner cities. When parents in Princeton, New Jersey, one of America's most privileged communities, became frustrated by the absence of clear standards of learning in their public schools, they first approached teachers and principals. When they got no satisfaction, and the education status quo remained, some of them ran for seats on the school board. Some of the reform-minded parents won, but their victory turned out to be hollow, as the real power over key education decisions continued to be wielded by the teachers' union, which was able to resist curricular reform by insisting that such decisions properly belonged in the hands of professionals.

The story told in this report shows how difficult it is for education-minded parents in a community to reform their public schools, despite the American tradition of local control and despite the many education assets in a community like Princeton. It also reveals how deeply parents themselves can be divided over the kind of education that their schools should provide. In Princeton, as events unfolded, the only way to satisfy both factions was to offer families a choice of schools. New Jersey's new charter law made this possible. The final hope of the reform-minded parents of Princeton was to create their own school, one founded on the principle of a systematic curriculum that embodies high standards and builds steadily from year to year. Today, the Princeton Charter School, now in its third year, appears to be a brilliant success.

This captivating story is told by Chiara Nappi, one of the parents who took part in the struggle for rigorous academic standards in the public schools of Princeton. *Why Charter Schools?* is an abridged version of a book she is writing. Dr. Nappi is a theoretical physicist at the Institute for Advanced Study. (During the 1999-2000 school year she is a visiting professor at the University of Southern California.) Disappointed by what she encountered in the public schools attended by her children, Dr. Nappi ran for a seat on the school board. She was elected and served on the Board of Education of the Princeton Regional Schools from 1993 to 1996. She later enrolled her youngest child in the Princeton Charter School. (Her other two children were already in high school and thus could not attend.) The story she tells in *Why Charter Schools? The Princeton*

Story is a first-hand look at the obstacles that make education reform so difficult, even-one might say especially-in the most highly regarded of public school systems. Readers wishing to contact Dr. Nappi directly may write to her at the Department of Physics and Astronomy, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA 90089-0484 or send e-mail to nappi@physics.usc.edu.

The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation is a private foundation that supports research, publications, and action projects in elementary/secondary education reform at the national level and in the Dayton area. Further information can be obtained from our web site (http://www.edexcellence.net) or by writing us at 1627 K St., NW, Suite 600, Washington, DC 20006. (We can also be e-mailed through our web site.) This report is available in full on the Foundation's web site, and hard copies can be obtained by calling 1-888-TBF-7474 (single copies are free). The Foundation is neither connected with nor sponsored by Fordham University.

Chester E. Finn, Jr., President
Thomas B. Fordham Foundation
Washington, DC
October 1999

Executive Summary

The story of the Princeton Charter School is the story of a long struggle with a happy ending. It is the tale of a community that was divided over what a good school is and does. The divisions were deep and could not be bridged by compromise or through local politics, but the charter school law passed by New Jersey in 1996 offered a solution-and a lesson: that sometimes the only way to satisfy groups that strongly disagree is to offer more than one choice.

The public schools of Princeton, New Jersey have long enjoyed an outstanding reputation, yet not all Princeton parents in the mid-1990s felt that the reputation was deserved. Some were dismayed to find that the schools lacked clear standards for what students should learn. Parents who expected the schools to have a sequential and systematic curriculum were constantly frustrated by their encounters with teachers. Fads such as "creative spelling" seemed to have penetrated many classrooms. While students from privileged backgrounds still succeeded in school, less fortunate students struggled.

A group of parents who wanted challenging standards and clearly-stated expectations attempted to reform the schools, but these "curriculumists" became locked in battle with "minority advocates." The latter, while not members of minority groups themselves, argued that the rigorous, structured academic program sought by the curriculumists would not suit all children, particularly not minorities.

Every attempt the curriculumists made to change the system from within was thwarted, not only by opposition from minority advocates but also from the education establishment, especially the local teachers' union. Teachers rejected the demands of the reform-minded parents as unwarranted intrusions into the purview of professionals. In an attempt to bring about the reforms they favored through local control of public schools, the curriculumists managed to gain a majority on the school board. Yet this majority was unable to effect the desired changes. Teachers refused to accede to the board's wishes, arguing that the reforms the board was calling for would undermine teacher morale.

Some parents became convinced that the only way to resolve this dispute-and find the kind of education they wanted for their children-was to create their own new school, a charter school embodying the educational

philosophy of the curriculumists. In January 1997, a group of them received a charter from the state to start a school that would provide a rigorous and challenging education for all its students. Although termed elitist by its critics, the Princeton Charter School attracted applications from one out of every four eligible youngsters in the district, including many from minority backgrounds. The school opened in September 1997, and its test scores and parental satisfaction have since surpassed all expectations. What is more, in response to this challenge-and the new competition-the local public schools have begun to make their curriculum more rigorous.

The theory behind local control of public education is that the schools should reflect a community's own vision of the education best suited to its children. But what happens when a community is deeply divided? What happens when compromise is not feasible? Charter schools offer a new kind of local control; instead of forcing all groups in town to accept a single sort of school, they allow a multiplicity of communities to form around shared visions of what a good school can be and what sort of education is best for children.

Introduction

One might think that Princeton, New Jersey, would be an unlikely place for a charter school. While most charter schools have been created in troubled urban districts, Princeton is an Ivy League town whose public school system, Princeton Regional Schools (PRS), with an enrollment of about 3,000 students in grades K-12, enjoys an excellent reputation. It is a prosperous town whose schools boast some of the highest SAT scores in the state. Eighty-five percent of its graduates attend college. Why would anybody go to the immense trouble of founding an alternative public school in Princeton? The answer reveals something important about the ideal and the reality of public education in the U.S. And the struggle to create this school included elements of many larger debates: national and state standards versus local autonomy; mandated curricula versus teacher autonomy; "traditional" education versus a "progressive" approach; equity versus excellence; compulsory bilingualism versus parental rights; and, finally, monopoly versus choice in public education.

The Princeton Charter School (PCS), one of the first in New Jersey, did not come out of nowhere. It was founded by parents who had engaged for almost a decade in a fruitless struggle to change the public school system from within. The charter school arose from the dissatisfaction of many parents with the quality of education that Princeton's public schools provided their children. The main complaint: a lack of standards and content in the school curriculum, which deprived many students, especially those from more disadvantaged backgrounds, of a real opportunity to learn.

The founders of PCS had first striven to reform the public school system, but their efforts met with stubborn resistance from teachers' unions, the education establishment, and some parents who felt that Princeton schools were doing just fine. In response, the reformers turned to a radical alternative-starting a school of their own.

The Charter School Program Act was signed by Governor Whitman in January 1996. Charter schools are alternative public schools that are governed independently of the local school board and district teachers' unions and report directly to the New Jersey Department of Education. They are financed from state and local taxes, charge no tuition, and are open to every student in the district on an equal basis. They are supposed to offer parents the opportunity to choose an educational environment that best meets their children's needs and,

One might think that Princeton, New Jersey, would be an

in so doing, to be models for change and reform in the public school system as a whole.

unlikely place for a charter school.

By 1996, charter schools and public school choice were spreading throughout the country. In his re-election campaign, and later in his 1997 State of the Union address, President Clinton recommended: "Every state should give parents the power to choose the right public school for their children. The right to choose will foster the competition and innovation that can make our public schools better." About twenty-five states, plus the District of Columbia, had already adopted laws permitting charter schools (today thirty-seven have done so), and hundreds of these schools were operating. The statutes varied widely, however, with some legislatures specifying rigorous constraints and controls on the new schools, and others adopting more liberal laws.

The debate on charters in New Jersey had indeed revolved around two rather different proposals, championed by Senator John H. Ewing (R) and Assemblyman John A. Rocco (R), respectively. Senator Ewing had proposed a strong law that ceded considerable autonomy to the charter schools, while Assemblyman Rocco proposed a weaker version, full of rules and restrictions, and backed by the New Jersey Education Association. The version that eventually passed was a compromise, but closer to Rocco's version. Princeton was one of the first communities to take advantage of the new law when it was awarded a charter in January 1997.

Public schools must please a wide range of people who often disagree.

After many efforts and much opposition, Princeton Charter School opened its doors in September of 1997. One out of every four eligible students from the Princeton public schools entered the lottery for places in the school. When the results of the first assessment of the school's performance were released in early 1999, they were spectacular. Just as importantly, the Princeton Charter School has prompted changes in other Princeton public schools.

This report is not primarily about the new school itself; it is mostly a story of the frustration of attempting to reform a school system. The saga reveals something important about the idea of public education. Public schools must please a wide range of people who often disagree. One solution is compromise, a blurring of differences, or the "least common denominator." Another is to offer options to parents to choose the kind of school they like best. Neither of these happened within the school system in Princeton. Creating a new school was eventually seen by parents as the only way to break the stalemate and effect change. New Jersey's charter school law made this a realistic option.

The Conflict Unfolds

Are schools as good as their reputation? Not always. High SAT scores and lofty rates of students moving on to Ivy League colleges are especially deceptive in a wealthy academic town like Princeton, where many parents are deeply involved with their children's education, and constantly provide them with enrichment programs, tutoring, test preparation courses, and other opportunities. Such heavy parent involvement has always been a major factor behind the apparent success of Princeton public schools. In such an environment, measures of students' performance may not truthfully reflect the academic value added by the schools themselves. The school system might have serious problems, yet the numbers would not show it.

The Minority Achievement Issue

The real measure of a school system's success is how well it works for all its students, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Princeton does not fare well in that respect: a 1990 cross-sectional study of students' performance, much publicized in the local press, showed that there were too many minority children in remedial programs and too few in high-school honors courses.

The study, commissioned by the PRS Board of Education under pressure by a vocal group that in the early `90s had won a majority on it, concentrated on the performance of the African-American (12 percent) and Latino (8 percent) students in the district, but did not analyze the relationship between students' performance and their socio-economic background. If it had, the study would have discovered that students' performance was more linked to socio-economic background than to race. Yet when suggestions were made to look at the socio-economic background of students in remedial and accelerated classes, local "minority advocates" opposed the analysis on grounds that it would be "divisive" for the minority community in the district. Consequently, the problem was seen as an ethnic-racial problem that came to be known in Princeton as the "minority achievement issue."

"Curriculum" An Unwelcome Word

In the eighties and early nineties, when my own children enrolled in Princeton schools, the reality that parents encountered was often very different from their expectations. Even as the case for national and state standards was being argued across the U.S.A., the word "curriculum" was unwelcome in Princeton. The schools did not seem even to follow district-wide standards. Curriculum decisions were completely in the teachers' hands. It was hard to find out what was being taught in a given classroom. Every time parents inquired, they were given a speech about the fact that, in Princeton schools, curriculum was not very important. Educators would explain that they did not believe in "one size fits all," and that they cared about meeting the individual needs of each child and fostering self-esteem. "We teach children, not curricula," was the usual line. As elsewhere, children's self-esteem was the dominant theme.

Specific questions about when specific topics would be introduced in the classroom only prompted more speeches on how children in early grades are often not developmentally ready for most of the material that their parents expected them to be learning. These speeches left parents wondering why American children were not developmentally ready for topics that their peers abroad appeared perfectly ready for. Nor did matters improve when children moved to the middle school. There the prevailing philosophy was that the children were going through puberty, which entailed big physical and emotional changes, and they should not be overly burdened by learning.

"We teach children, not curricula."

When parents complained about their child's experience in school, even if they explicitly complained about the deficiencies of the curriculum, teachers and principals tended to treat each case as new and unrelated to any previous one, preferring to come up with solutions specific to a particular child rather than trying to modify the program to improve it for all children. This approach was undoubtedly encouraged by some parents, who traditionally dealt with problems by lobbying for special intervention or for the best teacher for their own children.

In grades K to 8, a major problem was the lack of a sequential and systematic curriculum, where lessons learned in one grade were built on in the next. The learning experiences of children in school varied widely from classroom to classroom, depending heavily on the preferences and abilities of the individual teacher, with little coordination between classrooms in the same grade and little continuity across grades. One could

find teachers in the same grade who ran a very structured academic program and others who ran a playroom.

For instance, some teachers used to teach reading via a method called "Dcodiphucan," based on the use of pictograms associated with sounds. The picture of a screaming woman on a chair, with a mouse running on the floor, was meant to represent the long sound of the vowel "e," imitated by the woman's scream. So the children, many of whom knew their letters and sounds before they even entered kindergarten, learned to read pictogram books rather than books written with conventional letters. In spite of innumerable parents' complaints, "Dcodiphucan" was taught in the district until the last teacher who liked it finally retired in 1995!

Unequal Learning Outcomes

At the end of the academic year, children were all over the map in terms of learning outcomes. The next year, they were all reshuffled into new classes and often their gaps were never noticed or filled. This approach left many students with serious educational deficiencies, and they had to rely on extensive help from parents and tutors to fill them. Of course, in an academic community like Princeton, where many parents are capable of providing tutoring and enrichment programs, many children successfully managed to navigate through the system in spite of its problems.

By middle school, wide achievement gaps—far beyond those explained by variations in ability—emerged.

At the same time, many other students, especially the more disadvantaged, were falling perilously behind. By middle school, wide achievement gaps-far beyond those explained by variations in ability-emerged. They corresponded closely to socio-economic status. By the time youngsters got to high school, there were two classes of students, those ready to take advanced placement and accelerated courses, and those who needed remedial instruction. Many of the latter were socio-economically disadvantaged (often minority) students, and this understandably created a huge concern in the community.

Many parents were eager to see more challenging and uniform education standards implemented across the district. They believed that the reason why disadvantaged children and minorities were not achieving was that the school system was not delivering a systematic and rigorous program mandating what children should learn in each grade. It was the unstructured and unambitious education program, they believed, that was responsible for so many children falling through the cracks. Rigorous learning standards and teachers' accountability, together with a structure to help all students meet those standards, could narrow the gap.

Trying to Change the System

Academic standards and accountability are such basic goals that it is hard to believe that anybody would oppose them. Yet ten years of effort got nowhere. The reasons why Princeton parents failed to change the system help explain why the options provided by charter schools resonate so deeply in many communities. The Princeton parents used many strategies to try to change the system from within: from submitting petitions to the Board of Education and working through the local Parent-Teacher Organizations, to serving on the Board of Education themselves. Yet even when reform-minded parents held a majority on the board, they got nowhere. Time after time, they met with strong resistance from teachers' union and ideologues. They failed because public education, a structure in which local autonomy is easily exploited by special interests, has evolved into an ideal system to preserve the status quo.

Curriculumists vs. Minority Advocates

The parents were also handicapped by their own divisions. Those active in school politics were split into two major groups. One group wanted challenging education standards, a focus on basics, and emphasis on academic content. They believed in a systematic and challenging curriculum as the key to a successful and more egalitarian school system. This group was known as the "curriculumists," a label bestowed on them by a Princeton teacher in a letter a local newspaper. A second group of parents preferred a less-structured school environment and greater emphasis on each child's comfort. Many parents who were active in local Parent-Teacher Organizations belonged to this category. Parents of children in special education also tended to fit in this group. Its core was constituted by those who viewed themselves as minority advocates, a vocal constituency that, in various reincarnations, dominated the Princeton education scene for a decade.

The Princeton parents used many strategies to try to change the system from within.

Few of the "minority advocates" were themselves members of racial minority groups. Indeed, the most vocal among them were white intellectuals. While they were occasionally able to mobilize a subset of the Princeton minority community on specific issues and in times of crisis, their views on education policies were not necessarily endorsed by the entire minority community. In fact, on more than one occasion, minority advocates and minority groups were on different wavelengths. One such instance involved bilingual education. In 1994, a group of Latino parents protested the compulsory placement of Latino children in bilingual programs and asked that parents be given a say. Their protest eventually brought a change in the New Jersey law on bilingual education, but Princeton's minority advocates steadfastly opposed the request for parental consent and supported the bilingual teachers' claim that only professionals should be allowed to make decisions about children's placement in bilingual programs.

The educational ideologies of curriculumists and minority advocates were very different. This division, framed as "equity versus excellence," was the seminal controversy in the district for almost a decade. Minority advocates considered the curriculumist stress on standards and accountability to be "elitist" and unfair to minorities. They saw high academic standards as discriminatory, yet another burden on disadvantaged children. In the words of one advocate "the right way to improve minority achievement is to start at an academic level where everybody feels comfortable and push the system from the bottom up." They complained about "systemic racism" in the district and concentrated on measures to eliminate it, encouraging teacher sensitivity training and workshops on diversity and multiple intelligences. Rather than stressing education standards, they stressed programs to foster self-esteem as a prerequisite for learning.

Of course, both approaches could have been advanced in tandem, pursuing both "excellence" and "equity." The curriculumists would have had no problem with that, since they were as interested in equity as the minority advocates were, but the minority advocates never agreed to try the curriculumist program. Instead, they insisted that emphasis on curriculum was a disservice to students and that a better approach was individualized teaching appropriate to diverse learning styles. Another solution could have been for the Princeton public schools to accommodate choice, by allowing for magnet programs within the district, suited to the needs of different students and the priorities of different parents. The two-model system was suggested at various stages: either incorporate some of the curriculumist philosophy into the existing program, or offer education alternatives within the district itself. As the editor of a local newspaper asked repeatedly: "If there is disagreement about how students can learn, why not offer those options within the district?" Had this been allowed to happen, there would have been no need for a charter school. But the "anti-curriculumist" alliance never let it be tried.

The Education Establishment

The Princeton education establishment-especially teachers, special-education staff, and school principals-was a major player in local school politics and was the other major opponent of the curriculumists. Its members had become so accustomed to classroom and school autonomy that they were not willing to give it up. There was no need to change, they insisted, since everything was working fine. As proof, they would cite the high SAT scores and the lofty rate of college enrollment.

> As the editor of a local newspaper asked repeatedly: "If there is disagreement about how students can learn, why not offer those options within the district?"

The fact that many Princeton students attended private or parochial schools (over 20 percent in Princeton versus 6.5 percent statewide) did not bother them. Teachers and principals always had a ready explanation for why a child was leaving the district: the youngster had special needs, the parents liked smaller classes or a more protective environment, and so on. They never acknowledged that parents might be dissatisfied with the education that PRS was delivering. They may not have actually cared, since the children moving to private schools did not much diminish the district's income, but left them with fewer pupils to teach.

Only when children started moving to the charter school, did "the money follow the child." Now that, for the first time, the regular schools lost both state and local funding when they lost students, the education establishment took notice. The other serious sign of system failure, the fact that a high percentage of kids in remedial classes came from disadvantaged backgrounds, was never seen as a symptom that the academic program was weak and needed to be delivered in a more thorough way so that students would not be left behind.

Earliest Complaints

Dissatisfaction with the K-8 curriculum had been bubbling for years when, in 1991, a group of about 250 Princeton parents petitioned the Board of Education for a more systematic and challenging math program. The district math curriculum was vague and weak; indeed, there was really no uniform district-wide math curriculum, and many teachers in elementary school did not even use a textbook. Therefore, the petition asked for a systematic, incremental, detailed and challenging curriculum, for adoption of district-wide textbooks, and for a district-wide assessment plan-all necessary ingredients of a complete instructional program.

The teachers resented the parents' interference and held that deciding curriculum was the exclusive purview of professionals. They accused the curriculumists of "wanting to write curricula themselves," prompting a debate that would continue for years concerning the level of participation by parents in the design of the education program. The only thing that came out of the "math revolt" was the adoption of a rather unchallenging K-5 math curriculum. Moreover, for years afterward, teachers complained that they had been pressured into coming up with a curriculum and, consequently, did not feel they "owned" it and were uncomfortable teaching it. But this episode did convince parents that the only way to improve education in the district was to elect to the school board people who would support standards and accountability. The hope was that a critical number of such board members would be able to put in place more systematic and challenging programs, and hold teachers accountable for their implementation. In the following years, curriculumists devoted their attention to winning seats on the school board, and, by 1994, they had gained a majority. That is how I came to be elected to the board in 1993.

Conflict on the School Board

Probably because education issues directly affect children, they engender much passion and ideological strife. Local boards can be highly politicized; they may include single-issue candidates who care only about their personal agenda, and they are easily disrupted by internal fights. A small but vocal opposition faction can easily maintain chaos in a district and undermine the board's functionality. That is what happened in Princeton during my tenure-indeed, during the entire time that the curriculumists held the majority. The school board was paralyzed by strife fed by the "anti-curriculumists" on the board and in the community. An entire year of meetings of the board's Program Committee in 1993-94 was spent just trying to draft a policy outlining how parents and board would have input in the educational program. Every session saw the usual cadre of board meeting aficionados objecting to the committee's work and accusing the curriculumists of trying to interfere with teachers' rights and academic freedom.

Curriculumists devoted their attention to winning seats on the school board, and, by 1994, they had gained a majority.

By the time the board finally put this procedure in place, it had become clear that curriculum was not the only issue. A curriculum on paper is no good unless it is implemented properly in the classroom and a supervisory system is in place to monitor its results. School board members are not supposed to get involved in micromanaging the district; rather, their job is to write policies and appoint administrators to implement them. The key figure in this process is the district superintendent. By the time I joined the Board of Education, however, there was no superintendent in office. The previous superintendent, an Asian woman, had been ostracized by minority advocates and forced to leave. (After a couple of years in her new district, she was honored by the state as Superintendent of the Year.) In Princeton, the curriculumists now had an opportunity to appoint their own choice, an administrator who shared their belief in standards and accountability and was willing to pursue the tasks of introducing curricula, supervising their implementation, and revamping the teacher evaluation process.

Our selection, however, was immediately opposed by minority advocates, who accused the new superintendent of "not knowing how to improve minority achievement." A board member complained that she came from a "white and Christian district," although she had served many years in a district more ethnically diverse than Princeton. At the base of all the criticisms was the fact that she believed in standards and accountability, which local minority advocates did not see as the right approach to the issue of minority achievement. For its part, the teachers' union objected to her on grounds that she supposedly was not devoted to consensus building, and therefore would not be able to adjust to the "Princeton way". Nonetheless, Dr. Marcia Bossart arrived in Princeton in May 1994.

The Reaction

The "Princeton way" was that teachers enjoyed wide autonomy and were determined to keep it that way. Consequently, they steadfastly fought any attempt to introduce change in PRS. We had hired the new superintendent precisely to bring educational and administrative accountability to the district, but that turned out to be no easy task. In her four years in Princeton, Dr. Bossart did not even succeed in getting in place decent curricula, since many teachers opposed the idea of clearly articulated outcomes. Rather, the district curricula became big fat books, repetitive and vague "bags of hot air," as a parent put it, that never contained precise instructions for teachers as to when students should learn what. The issue of district-wide

assessments got nowhere, either, since some teachers feared them as means of comparing classroom performance and hence a tool for teachers' accountability. Nor did minority advocates support tests, which they viewed as inherently inequitable since not all children performed equally well on them.

For years, Princeton had not had much of a supervisory system for teachers.

If anything, the education program worsened. All kind of new fads made it into the classroom, often without parents or board members having any idea what was going on. As with so many education fads, some of the changes were not inherently bad, but they were pursued to extremes. There was a big emphasis on "critical thinking," for example, in lieu of content-learning, which was derided as "rote memorization." Phonics was supplanted by the "whole language approach," which was hailed as a more egalitarian way of teaching reading. Correct spelling was replaced by "invented spelling." Math skills were de-emphasized and not practiced much, hence never acquired by many students. Portfolio and peer evaluation tended to replace regular grading of tests and homework, with the consequence that it became impossible for parents and students to have a sense of how they were doing in class until the term grade arrived.

Teachers Dig In

For years, Princeton had not had much of a supervisory system for teachers. According to New Jersey law, every untenured teacher is supposed to be evaluated by a supervisor three times a year and every tenured teacher at least once a year. In Princeton, however, evaluation and supervision practices were lax, in part because there were not enough supervisors to do the job. Therefore the first step of the new superintendent was to strengthen the supervisory system in the district. According to code and good practice, teachers should also prepare daily written lesson plans and make them available to the supervisor, if requested. Again, this was not happening uniformly across the district. When Dr. Bossart tried to reintroduce these practices, the teachers' union president declared it demeaning to submit lesson plans, and said only bad teachers should be required to do so. Of course, he never volunteered a list of the bad teachers in the district. Instead, he complained that the teachers' morale was undermined by the request, and by the fact that they had not been consulted properly. That was the teachers' complaint every time they did not get their way: that the decision-making process was not sufficiently participatory. Over and over, the teachers skillfully played the card of low morale. They complained that they did not feel appreciated and that Dr. Bossart had neither "institutional memory" nor "appreciation for the Princeton way"; to them, she seemed too eager to comply with the board mandate to bring accountability to the district.

Every time a controversial issue came up, the teachers invaded the board room en masse. When they had finished voicing their complaints, the minority advocates would take over. Curriculumists "were trying to usurp the role of the educators." The teachers had "sound educational reasons to be unsatisfied with the board majority agenda." Rather than enforcing curricula and supervision, "accountability should be accomplished by restructuring the schools so that teachers have more ownership, monitor each other and assume responsibility for each other's growth and teaching." One could not help wondering why such a plan to achieve accountability had not worked yet, since "ownership" had been the rule in Princeton for decades. The local press would summarize the crisis by saying that "The policies of the board and the Administration ...have been identified with elitism and inflexible standards."

One by one, the curriculumists on the board were voted out and replaced by teacher-friendly board members.

Campaign Against the Superintendent

When the superintendent's contract came up for renewal in 1996, the teachers' union mounted a relentless campaign against her. There was no trick that the union did not use to heighten tension in the district. It took multiple votes of "no confidence" against her. It solicited confidential evaluations of her performance by its membership and then leaked these to the press. The complaints were that "she lacked educational vision and leadership" and "made no meaningful use of teacher expertise in forming decisions that deeply affect the district." The dismissal by the superintendent of the high-school principal became a new *casus belli*. High-school students, escorted by teachers, marched from the high school to the administration building to protest the dismissals.

At board meetings, we sat through hours of teachers telling us how demoralized they were by the prospect that the superintendent's contract would be renewed. After the teachers were finished, students stood to voice their complaints. The teachers incited them and reprimanded the board: "We have trained them as the citizens of tomorrow. By not listening to them, you are despots, you destroy their faith in democracy." When the superintendent's contract was renewed anyway, the union president threatened, "I expect the next three years to be difficult, if things do not change." But things did change.

Teachers Develop an Electoral Strategy

To counteract the curriculumist pressure, teachers began to get heavily involved with board elections in 1993. Low voter turn-out in school elections is a major problem with many school boards. In Princeton, fewer than 17 percent of eligible voters vote in school elections. A couple of hundred votes can go a long way toward deciding the outcome. A good half of the district's 300 professional employees live in the community, and have family, friends, neighbors, and others whose vote they can influence.

> Princeton parents had paid little attention to the statewide debate about charter schools, so intent were they on improving the existing public schools.

Princeton teachers organized parties for their favorite candidates, sent letters to the newspapers supporting them (without identifying themselves as district teachers), and put their names on signature ads that board candidates published in the local press. Students were easy pawns. The student newspaper editorials almost always parroted the teachers' union's viewpoint on controversial issues. Some teachers (illegally) spent classroom time giving students their view of the various issues. Students were encouraged to come to board meetings and exercise their democratic rights (i.e., support the teachers' viewpoint).

Election after election, the teachers' union and the self-appointed minority advocates worked together in perfect unison to support the same candidates, and oppose those who favored standards and accountability. One by one, the curriculumists on the board were voted out and replaced by teacher-friendly board members. Parents were weary of the unpleasant aspects and personal costs of board service, and not sure anymore that serving on the school board was an effective way to change the system. That is why I chose not to run again when my term expired in 1996. Despite our majority, we had not been able to introduce significant changes in the district. The opposition by the teachers' union and a few determined ideologues had countered all our efforts.

Finally, in 1997 the curriculumists lost their majority on the board and the new board capitulated to the unions' demands and forced the superintendent out. Her departure brought to a complete halt the attempt to reform the system from within. In Princeton, local control over schools seemed to mean teacher union control. There had to be another way, even if it meant working outside the system.

The Founding of the Charter School

Princeton parents had paid little attention to the statewide debate about charter schools, so intent were they on improving the existing public schools. The idea of charter schools was a novelty to them, and they had mixed feelings about it. They were deeply committed to public education, the very reason they had invested so much time and energy trying to improve it, and were not sure that charter schools were the right way to go. Would these schools strengthen or weaken public education? They agonized for months. They were also worried about the enormous amount of work that it would take to start an alternative public school. The issue of money was daunting, too. While the average per-pupil expenditure in PRS was above $11,000, the charter school would have to operate on 90 percent of the cost of "thorough and efficient" education as set by the state, i.e., at about $6,500 per pupil, which sum would also have to cover start-up costs, facilities, equipment, and the like.

Nonetheless, in the summer of 1996, the idea of the Princeton Charter School started taking shape. For many of the people who got involved, it was the continuation of their longstanding effort to improve public education. The charter school would embody the educational philosophy that these curriculum-minded Princeton parents had advocated for years. They had been trying to reform the system from within and had met one brick wall after another. Now, given the political situation in the district, a charter school appeared to be the only tool that could catalyze change, or at least offer an alternative to those seeking a more rigorous and challenging education.

I opted not to be one of the PCS founders. I had just finished my term on the school board, and my name was still associated with too many controversies. Early involvement with the charter school might dispose the Princeton education establishment against it. Although this was a hard choice, it seemed the right thing to let new people take over. Indeed, ten of the original seventeen founders were people who had not previously been involved with school politics.

The PCS founders adopted a non-confrontational approach. As they explained in a statement describing the new school to the community, "Not all parents agree with our educational viewpoint, nor would all parents want to enroll their children in a school built around the principles of PCS. This is exactly why we need charter schools-to allow parents to make the choice that they believe is best for their child." The PCS founders argued that, by offering parents a choice of education environments, some of the strife in the district could be eliminated, and the energy saved might be applied toward educating students. Similarly, they stressed the experimental advantages that it would offer. A charter school could offer the opportunity for other public-school educators to see how well a program with a different focus actually worked before deciding to try it themselves.

The Charter School's Philosophy

The Princeton Charter School was designed as a K-8 school with a rigorous, sequential curriculum, integrated assessments to ensure mastery, and an atmosphere that affirmed academic achievement as a central value. The school's founders described its philosophy as follows:

> *PCS believes that all children learn best when taught a systematic curriculum which sets high standards and builds steadily from year to year. The school will focus on the major academic disciplines for learning of content as well as mastery of skills. We believe that only through meeting*

challenges arising from a sequential and cumulative curriculum, with a significant skills component, do learners build genuine self esteem. Students should celebrate concrete accomplishment and mastery of appropriately defined objectives.

The founders repeated the familiar criticism of many public school systems:

We view Kindergarten through eighth grade years as a precious resource not to be squandered. Young students must have a strong, challenging education if they are to build a foundation solid enough to be the base for a lifetime of learning. The failure to adequately challenge this age group is a national problem. Serious education must begin earlier than is fashionable today-before the learner is faced with the complexities of approaching adulthood. It is naive to expect the schools to entirely erase differences in achievement, but we believe that a stronger program will significantly ameliorate them. Today many students never overcome their disadvantage, and both the student and society pay a price.

None of this was new; it had been said many times before, in the platforms of the curriculumists. But when it was presented as the philosophy of a new alternative public school, it was received as an unfamiliar anathema that nobody had ever heard before.

Opposition to the Charter School

According to state law, the decision to grant a charter is in the hands of the Commissioner of Education. However, the Princeton Regional School board was supposed to make a recommendation to him favoring or opposing the charter school. The community debate that took place on the issue proved enlightening.

Princeton teachers as a group did not come out officially against the charter school. The Princeton Regional Education Association president refused to make comments in the press, except to say that his comments would be "unprintable." Yet Princeton teachers missed no opportunity to undermine the charter school. Whatever they did not say openly, they made sure to say behind the scenes. Among other things, they forced the resignation of the co-president of a district Parent-Teacher Organization because she had expressed support for the establishment of PCS. In calling for her resignation, they cited her supposed "conflict of interests," as if they thought her support for PCS would undermine her efforts to raise money for her PRS school and to organize teachers' luncheons, which is much of what she did as PTO President. (Interestingly enough, her school eventually sent the most applicants to PCS.)

Princeton teachers missed no opportunity to undermine the charter school.

Probably fomented by the teachers, opposition to the charter school was voiced by an active faction of high-school students. Although the high school was not directly affected (since PCS was to end with grade eight), the student council voted 26 to 1 to oppose the charter school. The arguments were familiar. There was the issue of teacher morale; in this case, the claim was that establishment of a charter school would wound teacher morale by showing that the district lacked faith in them. Great stress was also placed on "equity." For instance, members of the Student Council said it was unfair that PCS students would be taught a foreign language in elementary school, while students in the regular public schools were not. (Why not? After all, the regular public school budget was far more generous than that of the charter school.) Ironically, both students who brought up this argument happened to be fluent in a foreign language, one of them having spent her last summer abroad to perfect it.

Another "equity" argument was that PCS students would be so much better prepared than those coming from existing schools that they would not "fit" in the high school when they got there, a sort of backhanded compliment to the education philosophy of the charter school. Another claim was that PCS would create two tracks in Princeton High School, as if there were not tracks already. Of course, the students who raised this argument, like many others on the Student Council, were all from privileged families and already in the accelerated or honors track.

With the blessing of the English teacher who served as newspaper advisor, the editor of the student newspaper wrote a long editorial entitled "Charter Fools," which spared no vilification of PCS founders. It said that the charter proposal was "an attempt by a small group of parents to place their children in a full-time gifted and talented program," and called them a group of "elitist, selfish parents who believe their youngsters are too smart for traditional schools... predominantly white, wealthy suburbanites who favor a return to old-fashioned, conservative styles of education." Of course, while accusing PCS parents of elitism, the author of that editorial was applying to the most prestigious colleges in the country.

The same board members who for years had fought any change now accused the PCS founders of being uncompromising and unwilling to try to change the district from within.

"Elitism" was likewise the core of the opposition to the charter school by self-appointed minority advocates, in spite of the fact that one of the founding parents was African-American. The decade-old debate on "equity vs. excellence" was resurrected. Since the charter school insisted that expectations should be high, students should be challenged academically, and are entitled to an education as good as that offered to ordinary students in other developed nations, it must, in the view of these advocates, be an "elitist" school. Although, under New Jersey law, charter applicants are not screened in any way, but are chosen by lottery, minority advocates in the district, in their usual patronizing way, assumed that only well-off and well-educated parents would be attracted to a school with a high-quality education program.

They predicted that minority students would not be interested in applying. They insisted that the charter school was a selective private school that was "taking money away from the district" to provide more for a few fortunate children. The truth was that PCS was going to educate its pupils at a per-student expenditure much lower than that of the neighboring public schools, and within that allocation it had to meet nearly all state laws and mandates just like any other public school. Indeed, among the worst problems the new school faced were financial hardship and the massive paperwork required by the Federal and State Departments of Education, which forced PCS founders to drive almost weekly to Trenton for guidance about the regulations and mandates.

Some exchanges during the board debate reached levels of irony and hypocrisy previously unheard of even in Princeton school politics. The same board members who for years had fought any change now accused the PCS founders of being "uncompromising" and unwilling to try to change the district from within. "Do you roll up your sleeves and fix it," one of them said, "or do you bolt?" These were exactly the people who had opposed any "fixing," and had supported the teachers who maintained that nothing really needed to be fixed. A minority advocate objected to the PCS stress on academics for all: "Now I want to ask you, who is going to collect your garbage?"

Another, a university professor, complained that many of the founders were well-educated university professors. They also objected to the statement by PCS founders that minority parents had expressed interest in enrolling their children in the Charter School. "Who are these minorities who have shown interest in the

charter school?" they demanded to know. Indeed, when the names of the children enrolled in the school were released months later, the parents of minority children enrolled in the school were contacted one by one and urged to withdraw their children. PCS opponents thus tried to fulfill their own prophesy that minority students would not be interested in the charter school. Nor were Caucasian parents spared. PRS teachers and principals approached parents who had enrolled their children in PCS and tried to talk them out of it, often promising individually tailored programs for their children.

The School Gains a Charter

The opponents managed to keep PCS in the press for months, giving to the charter school law more publicity that it got anywhere else in New Jersey. In January, 1997, however, the Princeton Charter School was awarded one of the state's first charters. When Commissioner of Education Leo Klagholz presented the charter to PCS founders, he remarked, obviously amused, that he had heard a lot about them. After so much controversy, the actual granting of the charter may have come as a surprise to some, but it should not have. Governor Whitman and Commissioner Klagholz were interested in promoting good education at a low price. It would be a feather in their caps if, in a lighthouse district like Princeton, a charter school would produce-at less than the state-average cost of a "thorough and efficient" education-an effective program that stressed standards, curriculum and discipline, and people would desert the expensive public schools to send their children there.

Even after PCS was approved, its opponents did not stop. When the State Board of Education revoked charters already granted in a couple of districts on grounds that the schools did not yet have buildings or principals, some charter school opponents in Princeton spent hours on the phone with staffers at the Department of Education making the point that PCS was in the same situation, so its charter should also be revoked. When PCS founders went to the Princeton Zoning Board to get permission to remodel a building they were planning to buy, opponents urged that the permit not be granted. "There are a lot of unanswered questions," argued one critic. "The racial composition is one. Is this a public school?"

In public meetings, some PRS board members kept expressing the view that PCS "might not succeed." By the February 14 deadline, the school had 186 applications for 72 spaces in grades 4 to 6. In spite of the negative propaganda, PCS drew one out of every four eligible students in the district despite not having hired a head of school or faculty or possessing a facility in which to operate. The numbers were truly remarkable since many youngsters in the middle grades prefer to remain where their friends and siblings are, and many parents do not like to enroll their children in the first year of a brand new school. The enrollment figures can be read as a clear message of discontent with the Princeton Regional Schools.

The seventy-two children were selected by lottery. Only half the founders were lucky enough to get their children in. The first two children to be selected were Latino. Their mother explained to a reporter why she had applied: "I was told this is a good school and I want my children to have the best." Although it was instantly clear that minority students were enrolling, the town's minority advocates nonetheless kept harping on this question for months, until PRS administrators finally provided statistics confirming that the ethnic composition of the charter school was similar to that of the district as a whole.

Charter Debate Shapes Election

The debate over the charter school was at the center of the 1997 school board elections. The local press reported, based on interviews with voters, that many people voted for candidates who shared their view on this issue. One candidate got herself into trouble by writing that PCS was a "wake-up call" for the district. If, she argued, PRS had been able to accommodate the needs of a large sector of the school population that

demanded a more structured and systematic curriculum with higher expectations and greater accountability in the classroom, PCS would have not been started, nor would it have been so successful in its enrollment campaign.

She was immediately attacked in letters to the editor claiming that all was well in PRS. Minority advocates now extolled the virtues of PRS, citing high SAT scores, and great chess, math and debate teams, the very areas in which minority kids were traditionally underrepresented. Ironically, these letters came out just as the newspapers were again reporting that a disproportionate number of PRS minority students were still having academic difficulties and failing the state test that is required for graduation.

The debate over the charter school was at the center of the 1997 school board elections.

The outcome of the 1997 school board elections was devastating for curriculumists, who lost two more seats by a handful of votes. One local newspaper said the election showed a close divide between those who favor "more freedom for teachers" and those who favor "strong administration and strong academic standards." As summed up in an editorial in another newspaper, "The net result on election day? ... An educational divide... It is not the Charter School per se that threatens to unravel the district; it is the school board failure to reach out to those parents who are dissatisfied with the shortcomings in the district... to develop an educational program that affords parents the choice, within the walls of the district's six schools, of the learning styles and approaches they believe are most appropriate for their children." The editor urged the winning faction, "For the sake of the school district, we hope that the new board majority will interpret the results as a signal that its top priority must be finding creative ways to embrace those on both sides of the educational divide."

Yet to the surprise of nobody who had been observing the Princeton political scene for years, the board's new majority showed no interest in compromising. Instead, they hurried to undo the changes that the previous board had been making. Within a few months, they had ousted the superintendent and gotten rid of the supervisors. To those among us who were tired of the Sisyphean task of reforming the Princeton schools, the only consolation came from the progress that the charter school was making toward opening in the fall 1997. It was amazing to see how effective and focused its founders were, especially in comparison with the Board of Education itself.

The Princeton Charter School Today

PCS had to face more troubles after it opened its doors in September 1997. Now that they held the majority on the board, opponents used all their leverage to undermine the new charter school. In 1998, they adopted a resolution urging the State Department of Education to deny any waivers or changes that would accelerate the school's approved rate of growth. They denied mailing labels to assist PCS in notifying district parents of upcoming application procedures and deadlines. Not surprisingly, the board members who voted against assisting the charter school in its outreach efforts were the same ones who accused it of elitism and not being active enough in reaching out to the community.

The main characteristic of the charter

But Princeton Charter School is doing very well. It is governed by a board of nine trustees, six of whom were appointed by the original founders. Three new trustees have been elected for a three year term by the parents of children enrolled in the school. In accord with the planned growth plan, in 1999-2000 the school will have 164 students in grades 2-8, and first grade will be added the following year.

school is its emphasis on curriculum, which is systematic, rigorous and thorough.

Two more lotteries have followed since 1997, and the percentage of students applying has consistently been one out of four eligible students in the community. There is a long waiting list for each class.

The economic situation has also improved. Thanks to a bank loan guaranteed by parents, the school has purchased a building surrounded by five acres of land, and is completing the necessary renovations to bring the entire building into compliance as an education facility. The original state law has been changed and now PCS receives 90 percent of the "program budget" per pupil in PRS, which represents the funding allocated directly to the education program. This amounts to $9,500 per student in Princeton, much higher than the cost of "thorough and efficient" education that the school received in its first year of operation, although still far from the per-pupil cost in PRS, which has now surpassed $12,000.

The main characteristic of the charter school is its emphasis on curriculum, which is systematic, rigorous and thorough, exactly the kind that the curriculumists had long sought. In each subject area, the curriculum is designed by a committee comprised of teachers, the school head, and experts in the subject area, who may also be parents of enrolled students. The committee also chooses textbooks and teaching materials. There is constant feedback between the committee's work and classroom implementation, and adjustments are made when needed.

The faculty is dedicated and competent. The school tries to hire teachers who have a college degree with a major in the subject that they are going to teach. If they are not fully certified to teach, they take advantage of another New Jersey law to gain alternative certification. All students, even in early grades, are thus taught by "subject specialists." The difference is striking. Even my son, a third grader in PCS during 1998-99, could appreciate the difference when, in his first week of school, he reported to me that his teachers knew "so much" about what they were teaching.

The school day runs from 8:00 AM to 3:15 PM. Students study English and mathematics an hour every day. The other classes (science, history, and foreign languages) are forty-five minutes long. In addition, physical education, music, and art classes meet twice a week. Once a week they also receive an hour of chess instruction from a chess master who works as part-time chess teacher and part-time facility manager-an example of the inventive staffing solutions the school is devising. Students who need remedial work get individual tutoring by teachers during "reading" period. Some stay after school for special assistance with homework.

Parents receive frequent information about their children's progress: grades and detailed reports every term, and mid-term reports, as well as parent-teacher conferences. Every subject is taken seriously and has an ambitious curriculum. In June 1999, parents even got a report on their children's performance on a battery of fitness tests known as the "presidential challenge."

At the end of the academic year, parents are surveyed about school performance. The results of the 1998 survey showed that parents were very satisfied. Finally, the results of the first assessment of school performance, released in January 1999, were spectacular. Standardized tests showed that PCS seventh graders were making three-year gains in writing and almost two-year gains in mathematics during a single school year.

While in theory public schools could certainly change, unfortunately

Effects on the System

they do not until and unless they are forced to.

PCS has forever altered the education picture in Princeton. During the board discussion on the 1997-98 district goals, the last curriculumist on the board, Dr. David Robbins, who had voted in favor of the charter school a few months earlier, proposed that the right attitude for the district should be to compete with the charter school so to "get it out of business." He said that obviously many parents felt something was missing from their children's education, if one-fourth of all eligible students applied to PCS: "If the parents are willing to send their children to a school that does not exist, we should find out what the problem is in our educational program and do something about it." Another board member said," If you were in business and 25 percent of your customers suddenly decided to go with another firm, you would be very, very concerned."

Although no administrator or teacher in the district will publicly acknowledge that anything was wrong with PRS, or that the arrival of PCS has prompted any shifts, things are quietly changing. In the elementary schools the program appears to be more systematic and better coordinated than before, with a renewed stress on basics. Teachers seem more responsive to parents' interest in rigorous academic standards.

In particular, the elementary math program has been strengthened. In the middle school, academics are back on the map: in 1997; for the first time, graduating eighth graders received awards for academic achievement rather than only for sports and arts. At back-to-school night, middle-school teachers handed out curricula and announced office hours when they would be available to meet with students who needed extra help. The district's after-school program has been partly changed to imitate the format adopted in PCS.

In the academic year 1998-99, PRS also started providing foreign language instruction in elementary school. Across the district, there are indications that principals are paying more attention to the quality of teaching.

This is what critics miss when they claim that there is no need for charter schools since "Flexibility and innovation ideally offered by charter schools can be achieved with fewer risks within public school systems." While in theory, public schools could certainly change, unfortunately they do not until and unless they are forced to. Usually, the parents who get involved with charter schools are those who have unsuccessfully tried for years to change the system from within.

Conclusion

In Princeton, New Jersey, the school community has been wracked in the last decade by bitter disputes over the educational goals and governance of the schools. A reform movement, dedicated to academic standards and accountability, managed for a time to gain a solid majority on the local Board of Education. But efforts at reform were nonetheless thwarted by deep divisions in the community and by powerful teachers' union interests. After years of trying to change the system from within, in 1996 some Princeton parents who were committed to academically-challenging public education took advantage of a new state law to found the Princeton Charter School, one of the first alternative public schools in the Garden state.

One of the main reasons why Princeton parents failed to change the system from within was that, as in many another community, there were deep divergences among the various constituencies about what it meant to improve the schools. In Princeton, curriculumists and minority advocates disagreed about how to raise the achievement of all children and about what the Princeton public schools should emphasize. The curriculumists believed in standards and accountability for

Indeed, one can

fairly ask whether majority rule is really the best way to deal with a disagreement about philosophy and values.

students and teachers, while their opponents considered this approach rigid and elitist. These are things about which reasonable people can disagree.

One way to resolve the disagreement would have been by majority rule. But even when the curriculumists managed to marshal a

majority on the school board, it did not work. The Princeton teachers' union became heavily involved in school politics, and used all its organizational power to oppose the regime of standards and accountability proposed by the board majority, until it finally forced the reformers off the school board.

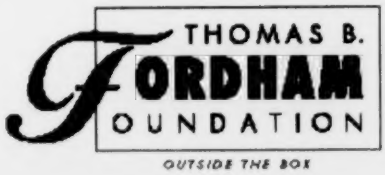
People of many political faiths sing praises to local control of public education. Parents live under the illusion that local governance means they have effective control of their children's education, and taxpayers believe that it ensures close supervision of their money. But rather than ensuring parent/ taxpayer control of the schools, local governance turns out to be an ideal structure for ensuring the unions' continued control of the education system. It is extremely difficult to achieve any change without getting the teachers' unions aboard. But it is even harder to get the unions' support on any significant program of change, as they are chiefly interested in the defense of their own benefits and privileges.

The teachers' unions have learned how to exploit the conflicts in the community to pursue their goals. A vocal and dedicated opposition faction can easily maintain a state of chaos in a district, thus crippling the Board of Education and, hence, any serious prospect of reform. Equally importantly, the teachers' unions know how to take advantage of low-voter turn-out to elect their favorite candidates to the board.

Real changes do not come easily to American education. Local control has evolved into a protection of the status quo. When it is impossible to change the system, charter schools offer a way to break the logjam and promote alternatives within public education. Princeton parents who were committed to reform found no other avenue but the charter route, which they pursued also in the hope of inducing a healthy competition in the other public schools in the district. Moreover, since ten years of experience had shown that there were widely divergent visions of education in the district, the founders' other goal was to bypass that strife by making different educational options available to the parents.

Indeed, one can fairly ask whether majority rule is really the best way to deal with a disagreement about philosophy and values. It is hard to see why parents should be forced to entrust their children to a school system that embraces a philosophy of education that they disagree with. Should public schools belong only to the majority *du jour*? (And will that majority position always be controlled by what teachers want?) One alternative is compromise. Another is to imagine a system of public schools that embraces a variety of philosophies, a system in which parents choose the schools that they judge to be best suited to their particular children.

Founding a charter school is tremendously difficult, especially when many restrictions are imposed and little support is offered by the state. On a personal level, it can be a draining experience, both because of the huge amount of work it entails and because of the emotional burden: school choice stirs deep feelings. Some view it as tantamount to the destruction of public education, others as the chief opportunity for renewal of public education. But given the depth and intensity of the disagreements in Princeton, it is hard to imagine a better solution than offering choices and encouraging pluralism. That is precisely what the Princeton Charter School has begun to do.



The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation

1627 K Street, N.W. - Suite 600 - Washington, D.C. 20006
Telephone: (202) 223-5452 - FAX: (202) 223-9226

http://www.edexcellence.net

To order publications: 1-888-TBF-7474 (single copies are free)